

JOHN MUIR

Friend and Interpreter of Nature

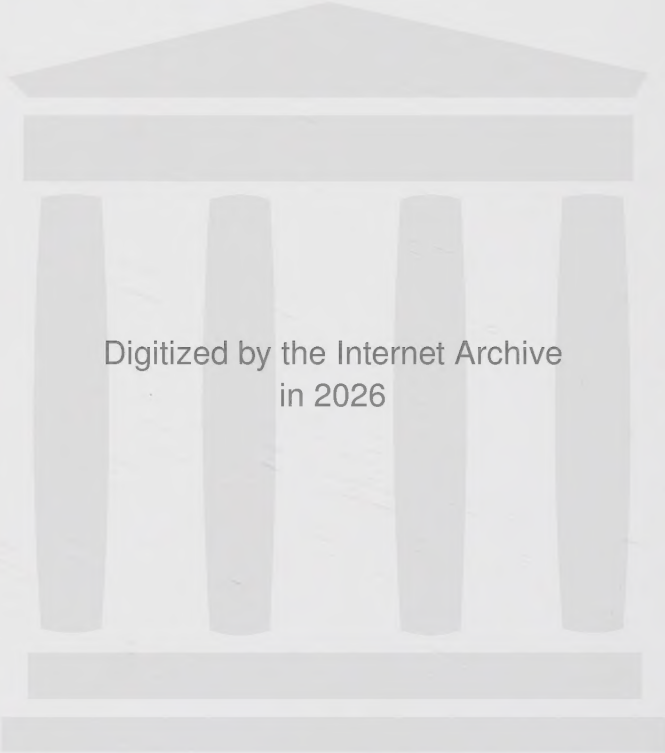
1838-1914



By

LINNIE MARSH WOLFE

DEDICATED TO THE BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA



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JOHN MUIR, inventor, naturalist, and writer, was born April 21, 1838, in the town of Dunbar on the east coast of Scotland. There, where the land thrusts her chin into the wild North Sea, he spent his childhood.

The Scots of Dunbar were a brave and hardy race. The storms of centuries had bred endurance into their sinews. Their ancestors had marched away to a thousand battlefields. They had bled wi' Wallace, and died for Bruce. Yonder on its grim headland Dunbar Castle dreamed of an heroic past. The ghosts of kings still reigned among her shadows. Indeed, they might sometimes be seen by small boys when mists drifted dim through ruined portals.

But Johnny Muir had little time to spend 'glow'rin' at ghaists.' He went to 'skule' when he was three years old. In those days stout pedagogs ruled with rods of birch. And Johnny was put through the usual Latin-grammar-and-arithmetic-thrashed-into-you course of study.

Out on the grounds he and his mates played the immemorial game of war. Soon it was that Johnnie Muir came to be known and feared as a 'gude fechter.'

At home his days were scarcely more easeful. Under the stern eye of his Calvinistic father John learned the Bible 'by heart and by sore flesh.'

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But life was not all dourness. There were wild midnight pranks when you and your 'brither' David scaled the roof in night garb, and dared each other to hang from the eaves by a finger. And grand days on the moor 'among the heather.' And Saturdays when you stole away to an inland meadow and lay on your back among the bonnie daisies and trailed with your eye the larks as they soared singing into the sky.

These joys were well worth the 'skelpin' that you knew you'd get that night at home.

Came that never-to-be-forgotten evening when you were eleven when your father announced, 'Bairns, you needna learn your lessons the nicht, for we're gan to America the morn!' And you were so near bursting with pride that you had to go out and brag to the street, 'I'm gan to Amaraka the morn.'

Morning came and you took train for Glasgow. From there you sailed away to that 'wonderful schoolless, bookless American wilderness.'

Many weeks later an ox-team and wagon groaning with their load of farm machinery, brought you and your family into pioneer Wisconsin. The last lap of your journey lay over a trackless prairie and through an unbroken forest.

You didn't miss them yet, but you had said a long good-bye to the romance and poetry of Old World life. The next few years were to be prose for you, my lad. No haunted castles here to explore, or legends told by your grandfather on winter nights. No time to steal away and look for skylarks. Trees must be felled; houses and barns built; stumps and rocks hauled away; virgin land ploughed; grain planted and harvested.

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Thus John spent his teens at hard labor on his father's farm in Wisconsin. Seventeen hours a day he toiled. But even while he worked, his thoughts went roving. Some day, he was resolved, his body would follow his thoughts!

So he cut down his night's rest to five hours. Every morning, while the household slept, he was poring over books of mathematics and literature, or sketching machines upon

paper, and then whittling them out of wood with a jack-knife. He invented a self-setting sawmill, a thermometer, a barometer, and several clocks. One clock was almost human. It would light a lamp, start a fire, and then tip John's bed up on end at two o'clock in the morning.

One autumn day John left the farm. He was of age now, tall, lanky, blue-eyed, with a shock of red-brown hair. In a sack on his broad shoulders he carried his inventions to the State Fair at Madison. Here two small boys were hired to demonstrate the effectiveness of the clock-and-bed contraption, while John with his rich Scotch burr acted as chief showman to the delighted spectators. Although his exhibit wasn't 'regular,' it won him a small money prize.

Here was his chance. With his prize in his pocket he walked up to the University of Wisconsin and registered as a student. No one could stop him now. When his father refused to help him, he proceeded to study and starve on less than ten cents a day.

At first he followed a literary course. Later he entered classes in botany, chemistry, and geology. Never had he been so happy! Down on the farm he was always observing plants and animals and learning about their habits. His father's meadow had been his laboratory where he had silently asked questions and searched for answers. The composition of the rocks puzzled him. And he wondered what forces had carved out the hills and valleys. Imagine his joy when science helped him to solve these riddles. Every afternoon, when classes were over, he haled himself to the woods and fields to verify what he had found in books. The out-of-doors continued to be his laboratory.

Tradition still lingers at Madison about John's room in old North Hall. It was the show place of the University. Visitors

were frequently steered that way by members of the faculty or by Pat, the janitor. As one might expect, there was a bewildering litter of plants in pots, plants in presses, rocks, birds' nests, insect chrysalises, and live things that flicked in and out of the open window in search of nuts and crumbs. All about the walls were shelves laden with chemical apparatus and mechanical oddments of John's making. The larger inventions stood or lay about on the floor. Chief among which was the Robot clock that brought its creator up standing every morning in the wee sma' hours. Near by stood a desk with a dial top that would whisk the proper book into position for study on schedule time. In the middle of the room the 'loafer's chair' yawned invitingly. It could be depended upon to discharge a pistol under the seat of the sitter who leaned back in it.

Long afterwards a room-mate, writing of old college days, recalled John as 'gentle and loving,' 'bubbling over with fun,' and 'the most cheerful and happy-hearted man' he ever knew.

Four years were spent at Madison, and then John left the University for a larger one, 'the University of the Wilderness.' The wilderness did not at first supply the student's bread and butter, so he worked for two or three years in a woodworking factory in Canada. A serious injury to one of his eyes sent him to the woods and fields again, and one day the young naturalist packed up a plant-press and some notebooks and started out on a 'glorious excursion' to the Gulf of Mexico. He walked every step of the thousand miles. Flowers and animals, the trees and hills and clouds, filled his days with riches unspeakable.

As he trudged along, he hugged close in his inner pockets three books — Milton's 'Paradise Lost,' the Bible, and the Poems of Robert Burns. These books went with him as long

as he lived. Their rhythm and beauty, woven into the very fibre of his being, helped him in later years to become a great writer.

Of course he had no money, so down in Georgia and Florida he slept in a cemetery and in swamps. Soon he was terribly ill with malaria. Fortunately, a kind woman took him into her home and cared for him as if he had been her own son. That, and plain Dunbar grit, pulled him back from the brink of the grave. As soon as he was able to be about, he went to Cuba, and from there set out for California to find health in her mountains.

On March 27th, 1868, the ship Nebraska tied up at a San Francisco wharf. Down the gang-plank came John with a bundle of maps and a plant-press on his back. Hungrily he scanned the skyline for the Sierra. A night's sleep, the purchase of a tin cup, a few pounds of bread, and some tea, and he was 'drifting mountainward' on his own long legs!

Spring! The San Joaquin Valley a vast flower garden! The merriment of meadowlarks filling the air. Other folks made this journey a-horseback. Not he! All Time was his in which to greet new plant friends, or kneel in the sand to trace the claw-prints of a field mouse. Night came, and he lay down under the stars while the frogs in some near-by meadow sang 'up to their throats in slush.'

For ten years John tramped the Sierra. Sometimes to make a few dollars he herded sheep. Sometimes he broke mustangs. But his main business was to explore, and to know the rocks and trees and flowers and 'God's small darlings' in fur and feathers.

In the course of his rambles he discovered sixty-five glaciers that no one else knew anything about. By studying the composition of the glaciers and measuring their flow he

evolved a theory of glacial action that was destined to change the whole science of geology. What mighty forces had created the Yosemite Valley? Men the world over were asking that question. J. D. Whitney, California State Geologist and Professor of Geology at Harvard, thought he knew all about it. He explained that it was formed by earthquakes and the falling in of the valley floor. Thereupon 'a mere sheepherder' named John Muir dared to disagree. He said that long ago an enormous glacier had gouged and ploughed its way along a fault in the rock structure and so had formed the Yosemite Valley. The debate waxed furious. But John won. All geologists now accept the glacial theory.

Everywhere he went in the Sierra, Muir found men wasting public lands. Millions of acres of trees were burned annually to make pasturage for sheep. Gold prospectors set fire to vegetation to get at the rocks. Lumbermen were sawing down redwood groves and dynamiting the sequoias! John's Scotch blood boiled. Not for nothing had he been known as a 'gude fechter.' Something **MUST** be done! So he picked up a quill that had fallen from the wing of a golden eagle, and began to write. In no time at all his fiery articles were being published East and West.

His words stung like whip-lashes as he strove to drive the money-changers from 'God's first temples.' He tried to make the nation understand that climate, water-supply, agriculture, animal and human life depended upon preserving the forests.

But he had little help. America was asleep! The 'forest-grabbers' were powerful politically. And John's single voice could not be heard in Congress above the 'bawling, blethering' oratory of the opposition.

Fourteen years went by. The battle still raged between

'landscape righteousness and the Devil.' Muir's old quill pen never lagged. Sometimes he was exposing frauds. Again he was luring housebound men and women with words like these:

'Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.'

The Devil was at last weakening. America was waking up! 'Save the forests!' was the slogan heard all over the land.

Finally Government took action. President Harrison in the early 1890's created three National Parks in California — the General Grant, the Sequoia, and the Yosemite. He also set aside for the nation thirteen million acres of forest reserves. Muir was everywhere given credit for this, and hailed as 'Defender of the Forests.' His pen had been 'more powerful than a regiment of swords!'

His book, 'The Mountains of California,' published in 1894, gave a tremendous impetus to conservation. A Federal Commission was appointed to investigate waste. President Cleveland set aside reserves totaling more than twenty-five million acres. McKinley added a National Park and about seven million acres of forest reserves. In all of this California was favored. John Muir had not fought in vain for his beloved Sierra!

Then Theodore Roosevelt entered the White House! In the spring of 1903 he sent word by Mr. Chester Rowell that he wanted to go camping in the Yosemite with John Muir.

So on May 15th the old mountaineer met the President's

train with pack animals and a camp outfit. The two went into the wilderness alone. For three days and two nights they tramped and camped and talked 'forest good.'

The President returned to Washington. At once he set about enlarging his conservation program. Before the end of his term he had added to the forest reserves one hundred and forty-eight million acres. And he had created five National Parks and sixteen National Monuments. Among these Monuments were the Muir Woods near Mt. Tamalpais, the Petrified Forest of Arizona, and the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. The last two of these were made Monuments at the suggestion of Muir himself.

So conservation became the nation's policy. And because John Muir lived and wrought, the scenic and forest treasure lands of America have become a heritage of the people forever.

But the achievements of Muir were not confined to America. Although he had married in 1880 and ever after made his home on a ranch in Contra Costa County, California, he spent part of each year in travel. He became known as a world explorer. In a notebook compiled on that thousand-mile walk of his youth he had signed his address as 'John Muir, Earth-Planet, Universe.' So to the end of his seventy-six years he retained the same boundless enthusiasm for wandering over the whole of this 'blessed star.' He explored the wildernesses of every continent. He penetrated the farthest inlets of Bering Strait. He discovered in Alaska the great glacier that bears his name. He went where no white man had gone, and where Indian guides refused to follow. He proved to scientists that the glacier had been Nature's mightiest tool in sculpturing the mountains and valleys and in making the earth a fit dwelling-place for man.

He loved all creation with an ecstasy few men have known. He believed with the Psalmist that 'the Heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handy-work.' His philosophy found no ultimate waste, no accident, or ugliness in Nature. What we call destruction and death were only creative processes working out the Divine purpose to ends of Love and Beauty. He cherished all forms of life — plants, animals, men! He wrote as passionately for the preservation of animals as he had for trees. He had what the world thought a strange idea about animals, but it was an idea shared with those other great and gentle souls, Robert Burns and Saint Francis of Assisi. He believed that animals were our brothers! Hunting he called 'murder business.' The higher types of animals, he thought, had power to reason as well as to love. 'Stickeen' is the story of a dog's devotion and intelligence. It is also a revelation of Muir's own sympathy for his 'horizontal fellow-mortals.'

He had a genius for friendship. He was not greatly interested in nations, in massed humanity. But he had a warm affection for a multitude of individuals. He never lost a friend. He never forgot one, however humble. Thirty-one years after his 'glorious excursion' he journeyed down to Florida to visit the kind woman who had nursed him back to life. In a letter to his wife he told the story of that meeting:

'I found the good old lady...in the garden. I asked her if she knew me. She answered no, and asked my name. I said Muir. "*John* Muir?" she almost screamed. "My California John Muir? *My* California John?" I said, "Why, yes, I promised to come back and visit you in about twenty-five years, and though a little late, I've come."

His heart's best love went out to children. He might well be called the Children's Naturalist. For he wrote of things that children care for, in quaint and burr-like words that stick in the memory. Birds, squirrels, and fawns sing and scamper through his pages. The flower people lift their sweet faces to be caressed. The streams are friendly companions. And Stickeen is the child's hero among dogs. For boys there is the lure of the trail. And tales of cruising among icebergs, camping out on glaciers, tobogganing down avalanches, climbing precipices, and swaying with the storm in the top of some tall pine tree.

In the tender language of love he wrote charming letters to children. And what a story-teller he was! He spun many a tale for his own wee lassies. Some of these were months long in the telling. One Paddy Grogan still rides his kangaroos on marvelous adventures in the memory-land of Muir's daughters. Whenever he returned home from far countries, he opened up his bag of true stories about the children he had seen. Black babies of Africa, yellow children of the Orient, furry Eskimo papooses rolling in the snow. They were all Nature's darlings and he 'couldn't help loving the little mugginses.'

The heart of a child was his to the end. Fame and honors came unsought. The 'world's prizes' meant little to John o' the Mountains. A chair of science was once offered him in Harvard University, but he refused it because he wouldn't think of 'leaving God's big show for a mere profship.' He dared to be free. He was, as Theodore Roosevelt said, 'a perfectly natural man.' Wealth he did not desire for himself. His wants were few. The passion of his youth was to seek for the cause back of the fact, and to be drenched and saturated in the loveliness of this 'Godful planet.' As he

grew older, the purpose formed in his heart to lead men back to nature. He began to write for the forests' sake. He continued to write for humanity's sake.

He does not need our tribute any more than do the trees and mountains whose soul-brother he was. But we of this machine age need him. Our children need him. It is good for us to do him honor and to heed his call. Out of our fretful, trammled existence he summons us to freedom. Healing is in his words. Rest for tired hearts is in his noble rhythms, courage and sanity and quiet breathing for the years that lie before us.

Listen to his words:

'Oh, these vast, calm, measureless mountain days, inciting at once to work and rest! Days in whose light everything seems equally divine, opening a thousand windows to show us God. Nevermore, however weary, should one faint by the way who gains the blessings of one mountain day; whatever his fate, long life, short life, stormy or calm, he is rich forever.'

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

JOHN MUIR was a citizen of Contra Costa County, California, for thirty-four years. In 1880 he married Miss Louise Strentzel of the Alhambra Valley, near the town of Martinez. The bride's father, Dr. John Strentzel, pioneer and large land-holder in the County, turned over the old home to the young couple. And there they lived for ten years. Meanwhile Dr. Strentzel built for himself and his wife the spacious house in the lower ranch on the Franklin Canyon Road. To this house Mr. and Mrs. Muir and their children moved in 1890, and it remained the naturalist's home until his death in 1914.

By his own wish John Muir lies buried on the upper ranch near the house where he and his bride spent the first years of their married life.

Mr. and Mrs. Muir had two daughters, Wanda and Helen. Helen, now Mrs. Buel Alvin Funk, resides at Daggett, California. Wanda, Mrs. Thomas Rea Hanna, lives with her husband and children in the old Strentzel-Muir farmhouse where she was born.

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HONORS BESTOWED UPON JOHN MUIR

A.M., HARVARD UNIVERSITY, 1896

LL.D., UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, 1897

LITT.D., YALE UNIVERSITY, 1911

LL.D., UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, 1913

MEMBER, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND LETTERS

MEMBER, WASHINGTON ACADEMY OF SCIENCE

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